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HISTORY: A FULTON COUNTY KENTUCKY CHAPTER

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Fulton County was created on January 15, 1845, the 99th, out of Hickman County and contains 184 square miles. It was fittingly named for the famous steamboat inventor, Robert Fulton, "the engineer who helped usher in the era of the paddle wheelers and turned the river into an even more important artery of commerce"¹

The first permanent settlement in Fulton County was a place called Chicken's Point by the Chickasaw Indians, Mills Point in 1819, and then incorporated in 1837 under the name Hickman. Hickman is located at the westernmost end of the county on the banks of the Mississippi River. Mark Twain supposedly called Hickman the most beautiful town on the river (Mississippi).

The creation of Fulton County was the result of efforts to keep the town of Moscow from becoming the county seat of then Hickman County. Moscow was a thriving trade center strategically located near the center of the county. Those wanting to keep Clinton as county seat of the then Hickman County teamed with residents in the town of Hickman and

surrounding areas to get their State Representative to introduce a bill establishing Fulton County.

The bill was enacted with the interesting and unusual provision that the town of Hickman should be the county seat upon the condition that the sum of \$4000 should be pledged and secured on or before the month of August following enactment for the purpose of erecting a courthouse².

The first courthouse was built in 1847. The present courthouse structure was erected in 1903 atop the bluff in Hickman facing the Mississippi River and contains a still operating Seth Thomas 8 Day Clock in its tower. The courthouse was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976. Because of its location, stairs, with handrails, had to be built to connect the courthouse with the main part of the city of Hickman. These stairs are a famous landmark of the city. In addition to these famous stairs, there is a similar set of stairs, concrete but without a rail, farther west of the courthouse. They were not in good repair but traversable in 2004. These steps begin at the base of the bluff where State Highway 94 makes its first, sharp, left hand curve coming into Hickman from the west and ascend but do not quite reach the top of the bluff on which the courthouse sits. To

reach the level of the courthouse, one must travel the last 25-30 feet on grass.

Therefore, they rise almost the full height of the three-level bluff and thus are longer than the more famous stairs to the east.

Hickman was the largest city in the county before the Illinois Central included the city of Fulton in its national line of railroad track. Located as it is on the Mississippi, Hickman was the center of the stream of commerce flowing from cities up and down the river and inland.

At one time, its sphere of influence was so wide that its newspaper, the *Hickman Courier*, was read at least as far north as Cairo, Illinois, 50 miles away, as evidenced by the following story. In August of 1912, young Syrian Wadeah M. Wehbie, a despondent, rejected suitor, committed suicide by jumping off the bridge at Cairo, Illinois into the Mississippi River. His nude body came to rest downriver at Hickman. Riverboat workers pulled it from the water and notified authorities. The *Hickman Courier* article of August 16, 1912 reported the incident, stated a detailed description could not be provided because of the body's deteriorated, nude condition and concluded by asking for assistance in identifying the body. In the paper published August 23, 1912, an article stated that the body had

been identified by a group of Syrian men from Cairo, Wehbie's relatives, who had read of the incident in the *Courier* and had traveled to Hickman to investigate. Wehbie (born October 25, 1889 in Syria, died August 16, 1912) is buried in Hickman's City Cemetery, near the Veterans Memorial.

A perusal of the editions of the *Courier* for the year 1911 documents its commercial vigor. Furniture, wagon, lumber, hardware, harness, dry goods, gasoline and coal oil and automobiles were advertised for sale. A person could ride the New Orleans and St. Louis Railway round trip to Nashville for \$2.50. Interestingly, some of these businesses were owned by people whose names did not reflect the usual northern European, Protestant ancestry. Saad Salamy was the Oil Man; Levbovitz was the "complete" Outfitter; Naifeh, the Dry Goods Man "On The Corner". The proprietress of the Price Hotel was Mrs. J. D. Price.

About 1882, four brothers, the Dodds, purchased approximately 2400 acres below Hickman. They and their slaves cleared the land for cultivation of cotton and alfalfa, raised cattle, mules, and horses. They brought a cotton gin for ginning of the cotton. S. L. Dodds purchased this property from the heirs of the Dodds brothers and

operated this plantation for many years. Through the efforts of S. L. Dodds, two additions were platted in Hickman which became the primary black residences and which carry his name, Dodds. Dodds was building a wagon factory and needed a labor force nearby⁴.

Robert Tyler, Jr. moved his family to Hickman area of Fulton County in 1826 from east of Shelbyville, KY. Tyler's grandson, Henry Ashburn Tyler, became a lawyer, served in the Kentucky Senate and became heavily involved in manufacturing enterprises. H. A. Tyler also served in the Confederate Army with General Nathan Bedford Forrest rising to the rank of General although in later years he preferred to be called Captain. H. A. Tyler built a beautiful estate on approximately 327 acres about three miles to the east of Hickman which he named Oakwood Farm. There he lived and raised short horn cattle, Standard bred and saddle horses. He also built a racetrack on which to train his Standard bred trotters. Capt. Tyler's son, R. A., drove two of Oakwood's trotters to records for the mile: Alfred G., 2:19 $\frac{3}{4}$ and San Mateo, 2:13 $\frac{1}{4}$ ⁵. Oakwood has passed out of the hands of the Tyler family but in 2004 was still occupied and most of the acreage farmed.

The black community also contained successful businessmen. The W. F. Crowell Tonsorial Parlor was the "leading and largest" in Hickman according a *Hickman Courier Supplement*. The Supplement also states it contained four chairs, hot and cold baths, boot blacking stand and "all the appointments of a metropolitan barber shop". The Hickman Joint Stock Company, Amos Nickels, general manager, was a corporation organized solely by colored citizens, to conduct a general mercantile business. In 1900 a Negro newspaper was established by G. W. Lucas called the *Hickman Elevator*.

Hickman, although not as thriving as in it's beginning, still has several important industries. The Hickman-Fulton County Riverport Authority is one of the few riverports located in a slack-water harbor and the only one in Kentucky on the Mississippi River.

Operating continuously (more or less as it closed for a short period 1991-99) since 1840, a ferry service connects Hickman, Kentucky with Dorena, Missouri. This 12 car capacity ferry operates from April 1 to December 24 yearly and is located at River Mile Marker 922 (from New Orleans) approximately halfway between St. Louis and Memphis at Hickman. Signs at both

ferry landings (Kentucky and Missouri) provide instructions for signaling the ferry.

Current Hickman residents remember when people came to Hickman to shop instead of going to Fulton. In 1983 scenes of Hickman appeared in the movie, "The River Rat" filmed in 1983, starring Tommy Lee Jones and Bryan Denahee.

Other Cities, Towns and Communities:

During the course of Fulton County's history there has been small communities spring up only to die out or become small residential hamlets because of the changing economy. Some of these communities were and are Jordan, Madrid Bend, Bondurant, Sassafras Ridge, Anna Lynn, Ledford, Miller, Tyler, Mable, Brownsville, Crutchfield. Discussions follow of only those with special historical or economic interest.

Community of Casey:

Casey, the county's smallest community, is located on Highway 94 between Hickman and Fulton. This community is where Casey Jones, the famous locomotive engineer, grew up. Born John Luther Jones in Missouri he acquired the nickname, Casey, after his home, when he went to work for the railroads to differentiate him from all the other "Jones" boys there. A Casey Jones Memorial was

erected in Cayce on October 9, 1938
dedicated by then Kentucky U.S. Senator
Alben Barkley³.

City of Fulton:

This city was established during the period 1859-60 when the New Orleans and Ohio Railroad line was constructed from Paducah, Kentucky to the Tennessee line and later through to Memphis. Chartered in 1852, the NO&O was later known as the Paducah & Gulf Railroad and the Paducah & Memphis Railroad. The city was incorporated in 1872.

Fulton's southern boundary is the Tennessee state line. The city of South Fulton, Tennessee's northern boundary is the Kentucky state line immediately south of Fulton. This juxtaposition links the two cities under the sobriquet of the "Twin Cities". The original town site belonged to a handful of large property owners, one of which was Benjamin F. Carr, Jr. The Carr family had begun to acquire land in the area in the 1820s. Benjamin Carr, Jr. owned a mercantile store and deeded land for the first railroad and the first Christian and Baptist churches. Carr Street, Carr Cemetery Park, and Carr Elementary School were built on land given by the Carr family.

Fulton grew modestly prior to the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 and grew

rapidly from 1870 to 1900. A newspaper, the *Fulton Daily Leader*, was established in 1898. A brief perusal of businesses operating in the early years does not show the ethnic diversity of the county seat, Hickman.

In the 1890s, the Illinois Central consolidated the rail lines serving Fulton linking it to the rest of the nation. With the Illinois Central's dominance of banana shipping after 1880, the city became the system's primary banana refrigeration stop in the early 20th century and was once called the Banana Capital of the World. This inspired the International Banana Festival begun in 1963 and continued until recently.

Geography:

Fulton is the westernmost county in Kentucky and lies within the region known as the Jackson Purchase. The Purchase consists mainly of flat, alluvial lands and is the only region in the state with large swamps, one of which is in northern Fulton County.

Kentucky is in the middle of the North Temperate Zone with a good climate and change of seasons being a natural advantage. Kentucky extends through 2 degrees and 39 minutes of latitude, and 82 degrees and 2 minutes west longitude on the

east, and 89 degrees and 34 minutes on the west.

Kentucky's location is important because of its relation to the greatest rivers of North America. The Ohio flows along the northern border and joins the Cumberland, Tennessee and Mississippi rivers in the west. The Mississippi River is the westernmost boundary of Kentucky. The state lies about 500 miles north of, and is higher than, the Gulf of Mexico thus all of the water which runs off the surface of Kentucky flows into the Gulf. The Little Obion, Bayou de Chein, Mud, Rush and Dixon Creeks are the main streams in Fulton County.

In 1818, at the time of the land purchase from the Chickasaws by Jackson, the Ohio River boundary of Kentucky was extended to the Mississippi and the parallel of 36 degrees and 30 minutes was continued to the Mississippi as the southern boundary. The western boundary, which was the middle of the Mississippi River, was accepted from a former boundary set in 1763 and again agreed upon in 1783. This boundary created a division of the river islands so that Kentucky was given islands number 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 (Wolfe Island), and 8 and the land in the new Madrid Bend of the Mississippi River.

Fulton County is divided by the Mississippi into two parts. Madrid Bend is the western part of Fulton County and is completely cut off from the rest of the state and cannot be reached overland except by crossing a part of the state of Tennessee. The length of the trip from the western Hickman city limit to the end of the highway in Madrid Bend is 35 miles. Madrid Bend is bounded on the west, north and east by the Mississippi and on the south by the state of Tennessee and contains approximately 8,500 acres of farmland and approximately 50 people. The distance around the peninsula is approximately 40 miles. Fulton County is bounded on the west and north by the Mississippi River, on the north and east by Hickman County and on the south, on the 36-30 parallel, by the state of Tennessee.

The highest elevation in Fulton County is 500 feet at the top of the bluff along Kentucky Highway 925 approximately four miles southeast of Bondurant in the western portion of the county. The lowest is 237 feet where the Mississippi leaves Fulton County. This is also the lowest point in the state.

The Great River Road, conceived in 1938, is a 3,000-mile parkway, which crisscrosses the Mississippi River at various points in the four counties of Fulton,

Hickman, Carlisle and Ballard in the Jackson Purchase. The city of Hickman in Fulton County and the city of Wickliffe in Ballard County are the only two cities in Kentucky located on the Mississippi River.

The Jackson Purchase area or Mississippi Embayment Geological Region is in the northeastern part of the Upper Mississippi Embayment, a part of the Gulf Coastal Plain. The Mississippi River Valley is situated along the axis of the embayment. The upper Mississippi Embayment is under laid by faults of the new Madrid Fault Zone, the most active earthquake zone in the central United States. The New Madrid earthquakes in the winter of 1811-12 were the strongest in recorded United States history.

Natural Disasters:

Earthquakes:

The series of 3 earthquakes, which shook the entire United States, began in the early morning hours of December 16, 1811. The second occurred on January 23, 1812 and the third on February 4, 1812. The quake in January put the earth in total darkness. "From then until February 4, 1812 the earth was in continual agitation visibly waving as a gentle sea"⁷ Intermittent strong shocks continued through March 1812 and aftershocks strong enough

to be felt continued through 1817. These shocks were so severe that they were felt in Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Maine. The New Madrid earthquakes created Reelfoot Lake in the northwest corner of Tennessee⁸. Told for the truth is the story that the Shawnee Indian Chief, Tecumseh, prophesied these earthquakes. Tecumseh's prophecy, given many months in advance of the quake, was accurate down to the very day the first occurred. He supposedly had been traveling throughout the country trying to unite the Indian tribes against the whites. The last tribe to hold out wanted a sign from Tecumseh that the Great Spirit was "on his side". Tecumseh told this chief that he was returning north and when he arrived in Detroit he would stamp his feet and the chief, in Alabama, would feel it. The stomping, or quake, would be his signal to the Indians of North America to unite in an army and drive the invading, land stealing whites off the continent⁹.

Floods:

Floods have occurred, especially around Hickman, yearly when the spring rains come raising the Mississippi. The low lands to the west of Hickman have been protected by levees for many years. However, floods in 1912, 1913, 1927, and 1934 broke through the levees causing

Hickman to be evacuated. After the 1934 flood, a seawall was built and the levees were raised. In 1937, rains brought flooding to the entire Jackson Purchase Region causing massive flooding in Paducah (McCracken County), Fulton and Hickman.

Epidemic:

A yellow fever epidemic began in August and ended in November 1878. There were 462 cases of which 150 died. A Citizen Relief Committee was formed and it received hundreds of donations in the form of medicines, supplies and money from inside and outside Fulton County. Dr. Luke Blackburn came to Hickman to render his services as he had obtained a reputation for curing yellow fever victims in New Orleans and Memphis. This reputation gained him the office of Governor of Kentucky in 1879. In addition to Dr. Blackburn, doctors also came from Nebraska, Louisville and Henderson to help. Seven Hickman physicians died¹⁰. Much of Hickman's population fled the town leaving it practically deserted. However, many Blacks in the community, organized by Warren and Sallie Thomas, volunteered to aid in policing the town and looked after the property of all during their absence. Blacks also nursed the sick and dug graves. The same genetic disposition to sickle cell

anemia protected the majority of Blacks from yellow fever. Of the persons who contracted the disease, 50% of the whites and 9% of the blacks died¹¹. Capt. H. A. Tyler specifically thanked the “colored” citizens for their efforts¹².

Educational make-up of county:

Since segregation ended in the 1960s, Fulton County has had one system of schools for its youth consisting of elementary, middle and high schools.

Before segregation, there were two systems. Separate schools for blacks and whites co-existed in the small towns of Fulton County, i.e. Blue Pond, Cayce, and Mud Creek, to name a few.

The very first classes for blacks were held in the basement of Thomas Chapel Church in 1870. One of the most famous black schools was Riverview Elementary and High School built in 1916 and located in Dodds Addition of Hickman. In 1965 Riverview closed. Its high school students went to Fulton County High School and the Riverview school became known as Hickman Elementary School. Riverview alumni include Rufus B. Atwood, President of Kentucky State College, 1929 to 1962.

Religious make-up of county:

Throughout the county today, residents worship in congregations of

Baptist, CME Methodist, United Methodist, Catholic, Cumberland Presbyterian, Christian, Church of Christ, Church of Christ-Scientist, Church of Jesus Christ Latter Day Saints, Episcopal, Pentecostal, Pentecostal Holiness and Church of the Nazarene.

The first black church was organized in 1867, in Hickman, by a group of newly freed slaves. These men were Cato Thomas, Valentine Matson, Samuel Tyler, Henry Clark and Warren Thomas, the leader and organizer. The group signed a promissory note for \$242.99 to purchase the church site from the East Hickman Operation, a local land development company. Blacks were now receiving pay for their labor. However, in 1867 the Freedmen's Bureau, under the auspices of the federal government, paid the balance due making Thomas Chapel the rightful owner of the church site. The church officially opened in 1869. Five years later the building was destroyed by fire. A temporary building was erected in 1880 but it would be 21 years (1898) before a permanent structure was erected. This 1898 building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979. It now houses the Warren Thomas Black History Museum, operated by the Warren Thomas Historical Society.

Population statistics and Ethnic make-up:

The first United States Census of Kentucky showed the population to be 73,677 consisting of 15,154 free white males of 16 years and upwards (including heads of families); 17,057 free white males under 16 years; 28,922 free white females (including heads of families); 144 all other free persons; 12, 430 slaves. In the area which included present day Fulton County, there were a total of 6,548 inhabitants of which 5,446 were white, 8 Free colored, 1,094 slaves⁶.

The U.S. Census Bureau's 2000 Summary File documents a total population of 7,752 of which 3,621 was male and 4,131 were female. There were 5,823 Whites; 1,798, Black or African American; 9 American Indian or Alaska Native; and 24 Asian.

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